

A Duxbury Yacht Club Story

BY THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY



Old Yacht Club in Duxbury

My First Venture In Faith

"Fifty dollars! \$50! \$50! That has been my standing offer to anyone who will teach me to swim!" This daily repeated offer by the wife of Gordon Tweed, the Duxbury Yacht Club's Commodore of 65 years ago, was strangely persuasive for a poverty stricken Harvard junior. (After all that would be about \$150 at today's values.) It is to be acknowledged that the preceding year I had squeezed through at a total expenditure of \$750, including clothes and travel. And a job as Yacht Club Steward at \$35 a week, out of which I had to take my meals, did not accumulate cash for tuition and other college expenses very rapidly.

My father who, at the time, was operating a retail meat business from the basement on Washington St. and a dairy route from North Hill did not have an income that would support a son at Harvard. So I was working my way through with a crew coach's launch driver job. Father never believed in paying members of his family for work in support of their living, coming from a 5-generation family and living and working a 2,000-acre land allotment given to the Tories who chose not to join the American Revolution, he was a firm believer in family self-reliance, his ancestors having raised multiple family gatherings all his early life. With the connivance of my mother, I broke with this tradition and took the job at the Yacht Club for cold cash. I had a total of \$159 in my savings but that had gone and Duxbury summer folks had come to my rescue. That is of course, another story. Suffice it to say, that the prospect of a bonus of \$150 was indeed something to work for.

It should be added in parenthesis that while the Merry boys were expected to work on family enterprises for free, the Merry girls were "farmed out" as servants in Duxbury families, ending up by their practical adoption, by these homes. My sister Betty worked for Dr. Spalding and entered Mass. General for nurses' training, later marrying a young intern, Richard Sweet who became a world renowned thoracic surgeon. Alma was "adopted" by the Alison Arnolds' and so it went for all 5 of my sisters.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Tweed teased me as she walked for her daily swim across my ballroom floor and repeated a dare of "\$50, \$50, \$50 — all you have to do," she said, "is to teach me how to swim. I'm tired of sitting on the sandy shore;" (which used to lie in front of the Yacht Club building).

So much harassing had stilled my conscience as I really feared failure, but I had come close enough in my mind and assessed the risks involved, beginning with the fact that her husband was my boss. He, of course, knew nothing of her plans and indeed she probably wanted to surprise him with her newly acquired aquatic skills.

But, I did have a few things going for me. Although I never had taught an adult to swim, I had some camping experience during which I had taught several youngsters to swim. The trick was first of all to show them that they could float in the water and swimming was simply providing the locomotion. The forward movement, that was all.

This I explained was all there was to swimming. You let the water hold you and your arms and legs provided the propulsion. Mrs. Tweed sat down in front of the big oak table, used to furnish a court bench to hear protests after sailing races, in front of the huge stone fireplace. I

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rehearsed again and again, that all you needed was faith — that the water would hold you up if you simply relaxed and let go and never tried to lie above the water. It was all just simple as dishwater.

And as I completed 3 instructional periods, I had indeed some things going for me. First of all, she was wearing the kind of bathing suit that was only slightly less than ordinary daily clothes. Her upper body was amply enshrouded in a black balloon like shirt. Her arms had large water-wing like cowlings that I had noted as I had observed her daily waddings.

Besides these body coverings, she had ample buoyancy of her own. I would not have described her as "fat" — she was simply moderately "filled out" and I thought she would float nicely in the water and I felt confident she would be an apt pupil.

I explained that with her faith, the water would hold her and she could chalk up another success in her life. I further explained that first of all we would begin in water, less than waist deep and as an extra precaution, I would hold both of my hands in support until I felt that she was indeed water borne.

All went well and the appointed day arrived and the tide had just passed the high mark. I was a little apprehensive as I felt her body tremble, but with a firm grip on the ground under my feet, I placed both hands beneath her ample clothing and said, "Now, you can begin paddling as I am here and no harm can come to so." So, obediently she began to stroke her hands and arms and feel and when I felt her attention was on this, I gradually removed my hands and a tremendous splashing and screaming occurred at once.

"You let go of me!" she shouted, and as she struggled to gain her footing she found eloquent words to signify that she felt betrayed. After a few minutes she regained her composure and asked, "Do I have to let the water hold me if I swim?" I replied in the affirmative and she expostulated in her outraged voice. "Then I will never learn to swim."

So that ended my first lesson in faith and I feel sure Mrs. Gordon Tweed did indeed never learn to swim.

I returned to Harvard in the fall and our paths never crossed again.

I have often reflected in my 65 subsequent years of teaching people the joys of lives of faith, I began with a failure as significant as this. Probably I was being prepared for many failures to trust one's faith in the years to come.

It should be added that when the members of the Yacht Club heard I was leaving Harvard to take a teaching post at an Episcopal Church School in Hawaii with a debt of \$200, Mrs. Horace Soule (Aunt Addie we used to call her) raised \$300 among her friends at the Club and presented it to me. The extra \$100 I used to sight see at Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon enroute to San Francisco by train. So, the \$150 I lost was amply covered. And the Tweeds had me to dinner a day or 2 before I left Duxbury, presenting me with an extra gift on condition that I take the mule train down into the Grand Canyon for a day on my way, which I did with great satisfaction.

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